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RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC  
RUEHVEN/USMISSION USOSCE 2400  
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STATE FOR SCA/CEN, SCA/PPD, IIP

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SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN: STATE MEDIA COVER U.S. EXCHANGE PROGRAMS,  
ASSISTANCE, REFORM SUPPORT

1. (U) Sensitive but unclassified. Not for public Internet.

2. (U) SUMMARY: Recent state media coverage of Embassy-sponsored events or programs continues to improve with relatively better coverage of U.S. Government programs and activities in Turkmenistan with slightly better success than before. Sensitivities on language use, discussion of problems or needed improvements in Turkmenistan have become less problematic in state media. The range of acceptable topics is only gradually expanding as evidenced by the Minister of Health's insistence on not running a story about a World Tuberculosis Day event. However, coverage of U.S. education programs and published interviews with the Charge are a step forward. END SUMMARY.

COVERAGE OF VIOLIN CONCERT BY U.S. PROGRAM ALUMNUS

3. (U) A Public Affairs Section-sponsored concert featuring a UGRAD alumnus and holder of a master's degree from the Boston Conservatory of Music received documentary-like coverage on state "Turkmenistan" TV channel (Turkmen, Russian, English, French, Chinese, Arabian and Persian) on March 26. The TV channel repeatedly aired a 15-minute long story showing highlight clips from the concert and carried interviews from Embassy officials who underscored the benefit of educational exchange. The principle performer, Eldar Hudiyev of Turkmenistan, was also interviewed in Russian. In contrast to our experience from last fall (reftel), his use of Russian language did not threaten broadcast of the piece.

NEWSPAPER RUNS INTERVIEW WITH EMBASSY INTERN

4. (U) On March 21, the state newspaper "Neytralniy Turkmenistan" (Russian, circ. 44,791) ran a short article introducing the current PAS intern. The article was based on an interview given to newspaper correspondent, Victoriya Novikova, who continues to be one of our most important journalist contacts. The story provided accurate information about the intern's background in dance including Central Asian dance, and her language abilities. The article also mentioned U.S. Government exchange programs, as we had hoped.

#### SHAEKEY ON COVERING WORLD TB DAY CONFERENCE

15. (U) The state-run dailies "Neytralniy Turkmenistan" and "Turkmenistan" (Turkmen, circ. 29,091) ran an article on March 25 highlighting the conference on World Tuberculosis Day, which was held March 24 in Ashgabat. The article emphasized the crucial role of USAID's support in implementing (through its partner, Project Hope) the World Health Organization-recommended anti-TB strategy, DOTS (Directly Observed Treatment Short Course), and their joint efforts with international and national organizations in combating tuberculosis in Turkmenistan. The article was accompanied by an accurate interview with the Charge d'Affaires who also spoke at the opening. "Altyn Asyr" and "Turkmenistan" TV channels both covered the event, interviewed the Charge and others, and prepared reports for airing. But both TV channels eventually dropped plans to broadcast the pieces, because the Minister of Health insisted that the subject of Tuberculosis was too sensitive or "scary" for Turkmenistan and said the disease was viewed as a taboo subject under "our first president." (NOTE: Despite this, the "Turkmenistan" channel kindly gave PAS a copy of their report planned for airing - unthinkable even a few months ago. END NOTE.)

#### PRINT MEDIA HIGHLIGHT FULBRIGHT PROGRAM SPECIALIST

16. (U) On April 1, the state dailies "Neytralniy Turkmenistan" and "Turkmenistan" carried an article on Fulbright Program Specialist Christine Martens on the front page. Significantly, the article was prepared by a journalist from the Turkmen State Press Service (TDH by its Turkmen acronym), an entity with which post has had very little contact. The article emphasized Christine Martens' interest in Central Asian traditional hand-made fabrics and carpets. The first paragraph clearly noted that she was in Turkmenistan under the

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U.S. Government Fulbright program.

#### USAID-SUPPORTED SEMINAR ON NGO LEGISLATION

17. (U) On April 3, "Watan" TV evening news program (Turkmen) favorably covered a seminar hosted by Turkmenistan's Institute of Democracy and Human Rights on bringing Turkmenistan's NGO legislation into compliance with international standards. The seminar was supported by USAID and conducted by the International Center for Non-Profit Law (ICNL). The program highlighted the involvement of government officials, ICNL's international legal experts, as well as representatives from civic organizations of Turkmenistan. The following day, on April 4, the News Program on "Turkmenistan" TV Channel carried short coverage of the same event, and the state-run dailies "Neytralniy Turkmenistan" and "Turkmenistan" ran an article by the Turkmen State Press Service (TDH). The TDH article noted the importance of interaction with international organizations and improving Turkmenistan's legislation.

18. (SBU) COMMENT: Although it is less obvious to the casual observer, recently state media cover a gradually widening array of topics and issues. Despite the last-minute insistence by a nervous Minister of Health not to air reports on Tuberculosis, print outlets carried the same information. In addition, the hard to reach and more hardline TDH has started to cover U.S. Embassy programs and events. All of these signs point to two things. First, the embassy's continued outreach to state media is working. Second, the country's leadership is incrementally more tolerant of an expanding range of topics in state news media. END COMMENT.

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